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JUAN RODRIGUEZ'S ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE: PART 6 OF 7

Out of the beat and into the black

THE FINAL BITTER MONTHS on the job were a stark contrast to the early inspiration offered by the Québécois scene

Longtime Gazette contributor Juan Rodriguez has enjoyed a vantage point on rock 'n' roll that few listeners – or even critics – have experienced. Before the music industry became a well-oiled machine, he found himself with enviable access to some of the biggest names to pass through Montreal, as well as some of the city's brightest stars. In this weekly series, he looks back at the moments that stand out in his career.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
MUSIC

Some of my happiest times on the beat were encounters with players in the burgeoning Québécois music scene.

Absorbing Quebec's pop culture was like plunging into the unknown for a kid from Snowdon whose childhood knowledge of French Canadians in the late '50s was summed up by the insult "Pepsi." This pop culture did not exist anywhere else — a counter-reality to the counterculture, a whole different world. Though my knowledge of French was so rudimentary it was almost non-existent — and jonal was infinitely tougher to make out — I went at it whole hog. I quickly learned that French and Québécois pop were like apples and oranges.

The Québécois in-crowd quickly picked up on my coverage; I felt flattered, as they apparently thought this anglo saw things in the culture that they themselves had not seen. (For I heard sound, not lyrics — which is numéro un with French speakers — and I really liked what I heard.) Of course, the Quebec sound, coming from a place geographically closer to America than the French, was raw, rough and ready. (Eventually I wrote a long piece on Montreal music for Creem.)

A rhapsodic two-page analysis of Robert Charlebois's famous January 1979 stand at Place des Arts was the breakthrough. The show was among the 10 best I've ever seen: he wore a Canadiens jersey, sequined gold bellbottoms and sneakers, and was imbued with the energy of both a boxer and a long-distance runner. Perfectly paced, with confidence and swagger to burn. I considered myself lucky to comprehend a quarter of the lyrics. It took some doing to write the rave he deserved while making my linguistic ignorance.

At my first interview with Charlebois, in 1971, I presented him with a new, introspective Chuck Berry album, San Francisco Dues; he gave me a disque by French poet/singer Léo Ferré. We drank cider (17% alc/vol) and smoked pot on a sunny afternoon at his Vieux Montréal pad; he drove me home at terrifyingly high speed in his beloved Citroën.

In December 1973, members of his band invited me to meet them on his tour of France. When I stopped backstage in Annecy while Charlebois was tuning his guitar, he said with surprise, "What the hell are you doing here?" Drummer Christian St-Roch handed me a palm-sized chunk of hash "to get you through" France, many of whose citizens regarded us as barbarians at the gate.

I spent long nights hanging out at Michel Pagliaro's home studio in Vieux Montréal, conveniently opposite the Nuit Magique, a trendy bar-lounge on St. Paul. The studio was both his psychic bunker and musical palette, and his two dozen hits remain local radio staples. The first Canadian to score gold records in French and English, master of the gritty hook and pop sonority in hits like Lovin' You Ain't Easy, Rainshowers and Some Sing, Some Dance, he became a cult fave among a handful of critics south of the border.

Unfortunately, his arrival coincided with the explosion of acts more closely identified with the nationalist movement, and although J'entends frapper was a huge part of that group's soundtrack, opinion-makers of a certain political and social class — can we say, uh, self-described intellectuals? — dissed or ignored Pagliaro.

On Nov. 15, 1976, we attended a Canadiens/St. Louis game at the Forum. Our focus on the game was continually interrupted by the ticker-tape scoreboard flashing results of the provincial election. Cheers and jeers greeted every Parti Québécois victory. When the final result was announced, Pag muttered, "Well, this is the end for me here." We retired to his drummer's pad to spend the rest of the night dabbling in pharmaceuticals.

Pagliaro's creative process is almost absurdly painstaking: "I may record 40 different takes of a number and pick out just eight little buzzes. Working in the studio is the kind of thing you have to do from scratch, sometimes without even knowing what sound you want to get. Sometimes, though, you get blasted with so much sound that you can't tell what you've heard. That's when I figure it's time to go to sleep."

The longest concert I attended was the One Love reggae event at National Stadium in Kingston, Jamaica, in April 1978. It featured 16 acts, beginning around 3 p.m. and finishing 13 hours later. The climax was Bob Marley's first Jamaican show since the assassination attempt in 1976, and the onstage unification of Jamaica's political rivals, leftist Michael Manley and conservative Edward Seaga.

Beforehand, I'd smoked the most powerful herb I've ever experienced. As the show wore on, I scribbled 16 pages of notes. When the pot started wearing off, I went to score some more. That was easy enough, but my notebook got picked out of my back pocket. Solution: Smoke up and start reconstructing the notes on the backs of flyers. Fuelled by pot and Red Stripe beer, I had the impression of the event hanging there like a zeppelin as the day turned to cool night.

You couldn't escape the disco-styled Heart of Glass in mid-1979, and the sultry, tranquilized face of Deborah Harry. This was ultimo manufactured new-wave pop; the acid test would be Blondie's concert. The arena was sweltering, I sipped a few beers and, unexpectedly, I liked the show. So I was buzzing as I wheeled into the post-gig party at Regines, quickly downing some Champagne and smoked salmon canapés, anticipating meeting Deborah in the flesh. Flash bulbs popped as the group headed to their table. I made eye contact with Debbie (who I heard was insecure about her talent) and plumped myself next to her.

"Ya know," I gushed loudly, "you weren't half as bad as I thought you'd be!"

"Well, thank you," she instinctively replied. It took three seconds for my back-handed compliment to sink in. Her bandmates glowered at me while they gathered table napkins and made a little bonfire in the ashtray. I skulked away. Blew it with Blondie.

My critic friend Peter Goddard (Toronto Star) wrote in 1987 that yours truly was "probably the first writer anywhere to fashion rock criticism into a form of guerilla warfare." Case in point: Neil Young.

Apart from his electric guitar — he might well play the best ragged-rock riffs ever — I've never cared for Young, with his whiny singing and his dummkopf lyrics. You know: "helpless, helpless, helpless"; "a maid, a man needs a maid"; "old man, look at my life"; and, at a death crawl, "hey hey, my my, rock 'n' roll will never die."

One Young show started with a 40-minute opening half, followed by a "short" intermission. Well, not so short: 45 minutes dragged by, and the crowd started a ritual chant. No response — nothing. What could they be doing in their dressing room? (Heh heh.) After an hour, Neil and Crazy Horse shuffled out and stood stonily by the stage steps. As the cheering went on for five minutes, a couple of kids scurried down to the off-limits empty seats nearest the Young gang. "Neil, Neil, can I have your autograph? Please!" Neil just looked ahead in stony silence while ushers hauled the kids off. Nice guy, eh? Maybe he was preoccupied, as he was a couple of years later at the Band's Last Waltz, resulting in Martin Scorsese removing, frame by frame, the rock of cocaine hanging from the hairs in Neil's nostril.

Then, in February 1980, toward the bitter, alcohol-infused end of my first twirl on the pop music beat, there was the local premiere of his concert film Rust Never Sleeps. An hour before showtime, I slam-dunked a few Cuba Libres at Mother's and debated sports columnist Tim Burke and his buddy Mordecai Richler. "I'm really gonna slam Neil tonight!

"Ya know somethin'" He wrote some of his most self-pitying stuff about his dad (also upright Toronto sportswriter Scott Young), who refused him the dough when his old amp blew when he was starting out! Aw, boo-hoo, too freakin' bad! Helpless, helpless, helpless! Ah-ha-ha-ha-HAH!"

Richler and Burke concurred: "Yeah, hit him with your best shot. The creep deserves it. Bartender, another double for the critic!"

I arrived late, boosted, possessed by the devil. Five minutes of Young's whine and the audience's zombie gaze at this motionless figure with the straggly hair and checked lumberman shirt up there fuelled an inescapable desire to shake, rattle and roll. So I proceeded to parade down the aisles, doing an Ed Sullivan imitation: "C'mon, let's *reeeally* hear it for him! Isn't he great!? Let's give this Canadian a *reeeally big hand* for a *reeeally great shoe!!!*" And so on. Friends couldn't calm me down: "Hey, man, you're blowing your cover." "Yeah? Well, it's about damned time!"

The next day while I was sleeping, news of the incident was all over CHOM-FM. I stumbled into the office at noon with a splitting hangover, begged not to write the review ("I can't be fair!"), and was told to do it if it was the last thing on Earth I did. Took me three pained hours for five paragraphs. Last-gasp graph: "He projects such a brooding image on the screen that you'd think Young had this film made so he could gaze at himself in his bedroom at night."

The following week, John Denver rolled into town. This time, my editor begged me not to review it. I insisted: "I panned the hippie. Now let's balance things by aiming at that smarmy dog-shooter!" (Denver had made headlines by shooting a neighbouring canine who was trespassing on his Rocky Mountain property.) I was relatively sober, and put down the evildoer with occasional dog terms: he whimpered, whined, et cetera.

The next morning, CJAD-AM mounted a protest campaign; The Gazette was flooded with 251 calls. "Must be a record," I boasted to venerable switchboard operator Millie Thompson. "Not quite," she replied, raining on my parade. Only the third-largest protest, after a scurrilous Aislin cartoon of the Queen and, No. 1, the time the Gaz forgot the avocado in a guacamole recipe. A lesson in life's priorities.

Two months later, I quit. (My last piece was on some unknown punk band at the Limelight.) I went through the '80s attending maybe 10 shows.

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CANADIAN PRESS FILES

Robert Charlebois (pictured in 1969) delivered one of Juan Rodriguez's 10 favourite shows of all time. Despite a shaky command of French when he began writing about music, Rodriguez quickly fell in love with "raw, rough and ready" Québécois rock.

FROM GAZETTE FILES

Rodriguez didn't try to hide his distaste for Neil Young at a screening of the concert film Rust Never Sleeps.

Next in this series

March 2: A good cause doesn't always make for good songs; back on the wagon with the Grateful Dead; Kent Nagano provides an entry to the classical world; a return to Montreal, and to a love of popular music.

Previous instalments of Juan Rodriguez's Rock 'n' Roll Life are archived at **montrealgazette.com/rocknroll**

GAZETTE FILES

Michel Pagliaro (pictured in 1975) was a gracious and frequent host at his home studio.

ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE ONLINE

Each week, we'll be posting content on our website and mobile apps to accompany this series. Look for video interviews with Juan Rodriguez, playlists (available on the website only) related to each week's instalment, vintage photos, a forum for readers to submit their own rock 'n' roll stories, and more. **montrealgazette.com/rocknroll**

MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION

One for the road: Juan Rodriguez in 1979.

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